

God and Moral Realism

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ABSTRACT: Only God, or a very god-like being, can provide both the objectivity and the normative power necessary for a really robust moral realism. Further, I argue that the classical theist position—the view of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas—that morality is grounded in the nature of God, supplies a better metaphysical background for a strong moral realism than Divine Command Theory does. I respond briefly to the criticism that belief in God can have no positive role to play in solving ethical problems, and I conclude with the observation that if the argument is correct, it entails that there is an argument from evil *for* the existence of God.

I. INTRODUCTION

IVAN KARAMAZOV OPINES that “Without God all things are lawful.” I would alter his claim slightly: Without God all things are rational. But suppose, as seems obvious, that there are horrendously evil deeds with compelling reasons to avoid them. Then not all things are rational, and this points to the existence of God. In this paper I argue that only God, or a very god-like being, can provide both the objectivity and the normative power necessary for a really robust moral realism, what I will call “strong moral realism.” Further, I argue that the classical theist position—the view of Augustine and Anselm and Aquinas—that morality is grounded in the nature of God, supplies a better metaphysical background for strong moral realism than Divine Command Theory does. I respond briefly to the criticism that belief in God can have no positive role to play in solving ethical problems, and I conclude with the observation that if the argument is correct, it entails that there is an argument from evil *for* the existence of God.

There are two constitutive aspects to strong moral realism. First, there are true moral claims that are objective. By “objective” I mean that the moral claim is to be understood literally, so that (for example) “X is wrong” is a claim about X, and its truth-conditions do not make any essential reference to the subjective or intersubjective beliefs, desires, attitudes, or practices of human individuals or societies. If “X is wrong” is true, it is true regardless of a human individual’s or society’s beliefs, desires, attitudes, practices etc. in respect to X.¹ Many versions of moral realism insist upon this sort of objectivity by pointing out that much of our ordinary moral practice depends upon our assuming it.

¹Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “Introduction: The Many Moral Realisms” in *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 19–22. I add “human” where Sayre-McCord does not.

What qualifies the brand of realism under discussion here as “strong” is a second normative criterion. The conditions that ultimately ground the truth value of the moral claim not only provide the rational agent with reason to act as the claim prescribes; sometimes they provide what I will call an “irrefusable” reason. It is generally acknowledged that moral claims apparently have normative force, but clearly the criterion that I propose requires some unpacking. For my purposes in this paper I shall hold that someone (S) has a reason to do some action (x) if S desires or has an interest in achieving y and doing x is a way of satisfying that desire/interest. I do not stipulate that x and y must be non-identical. Wanting to go to the movies might be a reason to go to the movies.

On this understanding of a reason, S’s having a reason to x does not entail S’s having a *motive* to x, if a motive is understood to be an actually occurrent desire or intention to x. For example, although x-ing might satisfy S’s desire for y, S might not realize this, and so no motive to x follows from S’s reason to x. For brevity’s sake I will shorten “desire or interest in achieving” to merely “desire,” but I deliberately understand “desire” in a very broad and general sense, so that a reason need not be egoistic. The mother who makes great sacrifices for the benefit of the children whom she loves desires the good of her children and hence has reason for the sacrifices, but it would be odd to label her reason “egoistic.” The Kantian who has an interest in achieving a good will and so acts from duty has reason to act from duty, but once again it would be odd to label his reason “egoistic.” This conception of a reason does entail that were it possible for there to be a rational agent with absolutely no desires or interests even in this broad sense, that agent could never have a reason to act.

An “irrefusable” reason is a reason that it would be irrational to reject as a guide to one’s action. S has an irrefusable reason to x if S’s desire for y is such, and the connection between doing x and having y is such that, if S is in possession of the relevant facts and capable of x-ing, S’s failure to x is irrational. “Irrational” is admittedly a vague and difficult term, but I think that the course of the argument will provide enough content that we can leave it unanalyzed here. I think I must allow for the possibility of conflicting “*prima facie* irrefusable” reasons, such that it would be irrational to reject one of these reasons as a guide for action *unless* faced with two or more equally important reasons to engage in mutually exclusive actions. In that case it would not be irrational to fail to act on one or several of the conflicting *prima facie* irrefusable reasons, but it would be irrational not to act on any of them. I will continue to speak of “irrefusable” reasons and allow the qualification to remain unsaid, as I do not think it affects the argument.

I do not claim that an irrefusable reason, when recognized by a rational agent, *must* give rise to action in accord with the reason, or even to a motivation to act in accord with it. The claim is just that if the rational agent recognizes the irrefusable reason and is not moved to act in accord with it, that failure is irrational, however rational the agent and his motives and actions may be otherwise.

Strong moral realism, then, is a metaethical theory that holds that some moral claims are objectively true and that, for at least some moral claims, the facts ground-

ing their truth provide irrefusable reasons to act in accordance with them. This is an externalist rather than an internalist view of moral normativity in that it does not hold that the reason to act is literally entailed in the very concept of the moral claim. The reason to act depends not just on the truth of the moral claim, but on the desires of the agent. My argument about irrefusable reasons in a theist universe will depend on one contingent claim about rational, human agents; they all have some desire (broadly construed) for their own well-being (broadly construed).

My purpose in this paper is not to try to prove that strong moral realism most successfully captures our ordinary thinking on moral claims, but rather to show that it fits best within a theist universe. But it would be well here to suggest reasons for thinking that this theory does indeed capture our ordinary moral thinking, lest the reader conclude at the outset that the view requires God as a metaphysical grounding only because it is inherently bizarre or extreme. A concrete example of a moral truth will help to make the case here and throughout the paper. Anything less than strong moral realism seems too weak in the face of horrendous evil, so I take as my example, "Hitler should not have ordered the Final Solution because it was morally wrong." The example has perhaps been over-worked, but it is a claim to which we can all agree, and it is useful to take an example from the real world. We can use it to illustrate not only how people *might* think, but how they *have* thought.

As half a century of moral objectivists have argued, it seems almost monstrous to suggest that "morally wrong" when applied to the Final Solution merely states or expresses a subjective or inter-subjective feeling, belief, attitude, social practice, etc. on behalf of the speaker or his society. Moreover, it seems commonplace to hold that if ordering the Final Solution was terribly wrong, there was compelling reason not to do it. It seems very odd to suggest that it was wrong, but there was no reason not to do it. And it is almost as odd to say that perhaps there was *some* reason not to do it, but nothing that a person could not rationally reject. If it is indeed peculiar to hold that "ordering the Final Solution was horrendously evil, but it was the sort of thing a person might reasonably do," then the normative component of strong moral realism really does seem to accord with our ordinary way of thinking about moral claims. So, strong moral realism is a viable approach. I will argue that there are numerous moral realist theories, but that *strong* moral realism requires a theist, preferably classical theist, universe.

II. NATURALIST THEORIES

A representative sampling of non-theist moral realist theories will show that each fails to provide a sufficient ground for the strong moral realist understanding of the objectivity and normative force of "Hitler ought not to have ordered the Final Solution."² The failure lies in the fact that in each case the facts to which each theory appeals as a ground for its realism do not provide an irrefusable reason not to commit

²I take my list of representative realist theories from Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, "Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics: Some Trends" in *Moral Discourse and Practice*, ed. Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 3–47.

genocide. An agent might agree to the facts and still rationally reject the moral dictum as a guide to action. Of course, we cannot survey every possible non-theist theory, but we can look at enough to make it clear what such theories are likely to lack.

Let us take the non-theist's universe to be more or less the universe of the scientist—a Big Bang, evolution, an eventual cold death (or perhaps a collapse, leading to a new Big Bang in an infinite cycle)—with the additional property of not being the product of a divine intelligence. It is hard to see what in this scenario could ground the objective truth of “Hitler ought not to have ordered the Final Solution.” The theory of evolution might be thought to explain why we believe the ethical statements that we do or why we behave as we behave, but the issue before us is what facts about the world would make it objectively wrong and irrational for Hitler to order the Final Solution.

As a first step we might attempt to ground moral realism in the metaphorical “goals” of evolution. Philosophers are not likely to be tempted by this move, but it is worth mentioning since it seems to have some force in the popular consciousness. Thus we might argue that for human beings genocide has a negative survival value. If the right action is taken to be the one which has positive survival value, then it might be true that “Hitler ought not to have ordered the Final Solution.” But we cannot ground strong moral realism in the “goals” of evolution. The sort of objectivity that the theory demands cannot be hostage to the contingent discoveries of what actually does or does not promote the survival of the species. Suppose it turned out, as some elements of National Socialist ideology hypothesized, that ruthlessness and genocide perform the evolutionary function of selecting for the fittest and prolonging the life of the species. We would not revise our opinion of the Final Solution and conclude that it was a virtuous undertaking after all. Moreover, this evolutionary moral realism cannot supply an irrefusable reason against the Final Solution. To my knowledge, almost no individual is actually motivated by concerns for the longevity of the species (or of their own genes). It is not irrational to recognize that an action is “wrong” in that it has negative survival value, but to reject this moral claim as a guide to action.

What of the theories that ground moral realism in self-interest? Hobbes and Rawls, for example, defend versions of contractarianism: the moral order is a set of rules to which we all agree in order for each of us to achieve our goals. The moral order is objective (relativized to particular environments, either actual or ideal) in that certain rules will actually prove more effective at insuring that we each achieve maximal satisfaction possible. In answering the question at issue here, the most fundamental question of why one should conform oneself to the rules of justice, whatever they should turn out to be, Rawls writes, “[t]he absolutely best for any man is that everyone else should join with him in furthering his conception of the good whatever it turns out to be. Or failing this, that all others are required to act justly but that he is authorized to exempt himself as he pleases. Since other persons will never agree to such terms of association these forms of egoism would be rejected.”³

³John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1971), p. 119.

One might agree that the contractarian rejection of egoism is a good place to begin the construction of an idealized system of justice for those who are interested in doing so. But is there anything here to provide someone in the real world with an irrefusable reason to be just? Does Hitler have a reason not to order the Final Solution? In the real world of the twentieth century great numbers of people worked diligently to see to it that the cruelest and most ruthless members of their societies had, at least within their own countries, almost absolute power, including and especially freedom from the ordinary legal and moral rules that the common citizen was required to obey. It takes ruthlessness, a certain sort of brilliance, and a great deal of luck to get away with egoism, but it can be done. If this fundamental contractarian claim about what others will allow is intended to supply a reason applicable to actual people in the actual world, then it may offer most of us a good reason to reject egoism. For most of us it is true that other people will not allow us simply to ignore the claims of justice. However, it does not provide a reason for those few with sufficient confidence in their leadership abilities. Hitler can agree with the facts adduced by Hobbes and Rawls, and he can appreciate the normative force that they will have for ordinary people, but he himself will not find in the contract theory an irrefusable reason not to order the Final Solution.

A different approach, still rooted in self-interest, follows Aristotle in grounding objective morality in human happiness, flourishing, or well-being as a human animal in this life. Aristotle argues that, since we are *naturally* social animals (contrary to the contractarian view), our good is naturally and inextricably tied up with the good of those around us, and the only path to human happiness is to promote the flourishing of others. The Aristotelian will hold that Hitler has a reason not to order the Final Solution since being a genocidal dictator conflicts with one's human flourishing.

If we allow the Aristotelian to stipulate that the *only* good rational persons could desire is their own earthly, human flourishing, then perhaps we can derive an irrefusable reason for Hitler not to commit genocide. But this seems too strong a claim, even for someone sympathetic to the basic approach. Even if it is true that earthly flourishing is very desirable, surely one could desire some goal other than the happy human life. The dedicated Nazi, for example, might put his interest in promoting the race above his personal flourishing.⁴ And if some acts of fatal self-sacrifice are virtuous, then one's own earthly happiness cannot be the only standard for value, the sole ground of moral objectivity and normativity. Hitler could desire Aristotelian flourishing, and he could recognize that genocidal behavior is not the way to achieve it, but he can rationally reject flourishing in favor of a good he finds *more* desirable; therefore he does not have an irrefusable reason not to order the Final Solution.

Perhaps one could move to a sort of social Aristotelianism and hold that the ultimate standard for moral good is the well-being of society. Among contemporary metaethicists Richard Boyd and Peter Railton argue that a realist ethic can be derived from recognizing that there are certain fundamental non-moral goods and

⁴Jonathan Bennett cites Himmler's exhortations to his subordinates to do just that. "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn," *Philosophy* 49 (1974) 129–34.

from promoting these goods socially.⁵ But could someone rationally choose against furthering these human goods? Boyd says yes. “[I]t is hard to see how the naturalistic moral realist can escape the conclusion that it would be *logically possible* for there to be a human being for whom moral judgments provided no reasons for action.”⁶ Boyd responds that someone who recognizes that a choice is the moral choice (fosters these human goods) but who does not thereby have a reason to act is psychologically abnormal and suffers from a cognitive defect, an inability to imagine themselves in the situation of others.⁷

Hitler, let us say, is psychologically abnormal and cannot (or will not) imagine himself in the situation of others. On Boyd’s analysis *ought* Hitler, morally and hence rationally, to cultivate psychological normality and practice sympathizing? No. Morality is for those who choose to foster human goods, and reason does not require one to make that choice. As Boyd says, “a concern for moral goodness can be a guide to action *for the morally concerned*” (my italics).⁸ Hitler can agree to the facts of Boyd’s theory regarding the interests of most human beings. He can recognize his own abnormality. He may grant that he suffers from a cognitive defect, although it is not clear why he cannot judge that it is the majority who are defective since their freedom is inhibited by their ability to imagine themselves in the situation of others. In any case, he has no reason not to order the Final Solution.

Railton proposes that there are non-moral goods, things that satisfy an individual’s “objective interests” and that allow “the possibility of saying that facts exist about what individuals have reason to do, facts that may be substantially independent of, and more normatively compelling than, an agent’s occurrent conception of his reasons.”⁹ Beyond individual rationality Railton postulates a “*moral point of view* that is impartial, but equally concerned with all those potentially affected. . . . We thus may say that moral norms reflect a certain kind of rationality, rationality not from the point of view of any particular individual, but from what might be called a social point of view.”¹⁰ Railton’s substantive moral theory introduces “an idealization of the notion of social rationality by considering what would be rationally approved of were the interests of all potentially affected individuals counted equally under circumstances of full and vivid information. . . . Relative moral rightness is a matter of relative degree of approximation to this criterion.” This notion of moral rightness can help explain why societies behave and progress as they do. “Just as an individual who significantly discounts some of his interests will be liable to certain sorts of dissatisfaction, so will a social arrangement . . . that departs from social rationality by significantly discounting the interests of a particular group have a potential for dissatisfaction and unrest.”¹¹

⁵Richard Boyd and Peter Railton, “How to be a Moral Realist” in Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton, p. 122.

⁶Ibid., p. 130.

⁷Ibid., p. 131.

⁸Ibid., p. 122.

⁹Peter Railton, “Moral Realism,” in Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton, pp. 142–43. Originally in *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986) 163–207.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 150.

¹¹Ibid.

If someone prefers not to adopt the “moral point of view,” is there something about the facts of individual and social interests that would entail that he *ought* to do so? Railton is explicit in answering, “No.” What counts as a good reason is relative to what one values. “Morality surely can remain prescriptive within an instrumental framework and can recommend itself to us in much the same way that, say, epistemology does: various significant and enduring—though perhaps not universal—human ends can be advanced if we apply certain evaluative criteria to our actions. That may be enough to justify to ourselves our abiding concern with the epistemic or moral status of what we do.”¹² It is not enough, though, to give Hitler an irrefusable reason not to order the Final Solution.

Could we ground moral reasons, not in human interests, but in human sensibilities? Perhaps our judgements of ethics and value are analogous to our judgments of secondary qualities like color. Perhaps there is a sensibility for value so widely shared that we can engage in moral discourse; we can evaluate, compare, and improve our moral sensibilities and hence our moral judgements. Normativity could arise if motivation were an intrinsic part of the experience of value itself. One “sees” the rightness of the act and “feels” the pull to do it in one experience.¹³

Sensibility theory is of no use with Hitler. Just as the color blind person is simply abnormal when he sees green where most of us see red, Hitler’s sensibilities are just different from the norm. *Ought* he to experience things as we do? No. Value is subjective and contingent, arising from the sensibilities that most of us happen to share. Hitler could accept the truth of the sensibility theory, admit that he sees things differently from the mass of mankind, and still not have an irrefusable reason not to order the Final Solution. Beyond whatever inconvenience might follow from being “abnormal,” he has no reason at all to conform to our views. Grounding the moral order in human interests or human sensibilities cannot provide the requisite objectivity or normative power for a strong moral realism.

III. NAGEL’S KANTIANISM

Perhaps, then, the non-theist would do better to take a Kantian tack and to ground the objectivity and normativity of moral truth in the very form of practical reasoning forced upon the acting creature. Thomas Nagel argues that practical reason leads to the position that, as one values one’s self, one recognizes that others possess value of a similar kind. And hence the reasons for our choosing to be treated in a certain way are reasons that apply equally in our treatment of others. Hitler does not choose to be exterminated, hence he has reason not to order the Final Solution.

According to Nagel, “[t]he first step on the path to ethics is the admission of *generality* in practical judgments. That is actually equivalent to the admission of the existence of reasons, for a reason is something one person can have only if others would also have it if they were in the same circumstances (internal as well as external).”¹⁴ The next

¹²Ibid., p. 141.

¹³See Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, “Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics: Some Trends” in Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton, pp. 19–21.

¹⁴Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), p. 119.

step involves the choice between purely egoistic reasons and agent-neutral reasons. The former, that it is only one's own interests that matter, Nagel finds unreasonable. The rational course then "would be to assign to one's life and what goes on in it some form of impersonal as well as purely perspectival value, not dependent on its being one's own. This would then imply that everyone else was also the subject of impersonal value of a similar kind."¹⁵

Does reason require Hitler to follow this path to its conclusion? Or even to follow the path *at all*? The first step, the recognition of generality in practical judgements, is a pretty sophisticated exercise in metaethics. Surely one can engage in rational activity while eschewing the practice of philosophy. Nagel cannot say that one morally *ought* to do metaethics since his claim is that the normative power of moral obligation comes further down the path—from our having chosen to see our own value impersonally. Suppose we urge Hitler to examine his behavior in light of ethical analysis. Might he not reasonably respond that he is busy?

Allow, for the sake of argument, that one cannot act rationally without admitting the generality of reasons. The choice then is between egoism and agent-neutral thinking. Why reject egoism? Nagel argues that human beings see things from two perspectives; one's own subjective viewpoint and an objective viewpoint of which the aim is "to transcend [one's] particular point of view and to conceive of the world as a whole."¹⁶ The egoistic view entails that each of us has value only for himself and those who (egoistically) care about him, and it "amounts to an assessment of oneself, along with everyone else, as *objectively worthless*."¹⁷ Nagel admits that this judgement is both consistent and general.¹⁸ Nonetheless he holds it to be "highly unreasonable and difficult to honestly accept. Can you really believe that objectively, it doesn't matter whether you die of thirst or not?"¹⁹ But if you cannot help but think that what happens to you matters objectively, that you have objective value, then you must make the same judgement for others, because from the objective view-point, you are no different from anyone else.

There are at least two objections to Nagel's rejection of egoism. The first is that, given the entailment that "I matter therefore others matter," then although subjective feeling may want to affirm the antecedent, reason can just as comfortably negate the consequent. In Nagel's non-theist universe, reason seems to be a proponent of the view that human beings have no intrinsic, objective importance. Nagel himself says, in describing the way the individual looks from an objective, as opposed to a subjective, perspective: "to see myself objectively as a small, contingent, and exceedingly temporary organic bubble in the universal soup produces an attitude approaching indifference."²⁰ Hitler

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 120–21.

¹⁶Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), p. 3.

¹⁷Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 122.

¹⁸In an earlier book, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), Nagel had argued that egoistic judgments did not satisfy these criteria, but by the time of *The View from Nowhere* he had moved to the somewhat weaker position.

¹⁹Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 122.

²⁰Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 210. Nagel makes this point in arguing for the value of not abandoning the subjective viewpoint entirely. The most workable world view is, he holds, an uneasy balance of subjective and objective.

may have to grant that his life has no more objective meaning than the lives that he destroys, but otherwise he need see no problem with genocide. It is just the premature popping of a few million organic bubbles by yet another bubble.

Hitler will probably be unwilling to grant that he is no more important than the millions he has ordered killed. But herein lies a second problem for Nagel's rejection of egoism. Hitler's attitude, that his interests and desires matter terribly, and those of his victims not at all, is perfectly consistent with the principle of the generality of reasons. A reason "is something one person can have only if others would also have it if they were in the same circumstances (internal as well as external)." Hitler's opinion is that his victims are not in the same circumstances as he. He is, after all, the Führer. Valuing yourself does not entail valuing others in the same way, unless you have made the previous judgement that others are equal to you in the relevant respects. In Nagel's universe, if Hitler chooses to place subjective value on his "will to power" as the trait that sets him above his fellow men, why should he not seize the role of Nietzschean Superman as he whiles away the time to extinction? One who recognizes the generality of reasons, holds that he himself is objectively valuable, and judges others to be his equals in the relevant respects has good reason to reject egoism and adopt an agent-neutral ethic. Yet, in a non-theist universe Hitler can reasonably dissent from these views. He need not find herein any irrefusable reason not to order the Final Solution.

IV. MOORE AND PLATO

Before we turn to God, there is one more non-theist approach.²¹ Perhaps in addition to the contents of the basic non-theist universe there are also moral facts that are non-natural entities, possibly something along the lines of Platonic *abstracta* that exist aspatially and atemporally.²² The difficulties with this view are legion. What sort of ontological status do these entities have? Can they bear any relationship at all to the world of the scientist? If they do not, must we grant that the universe is a wildly schizophrenic place? And how can we spatial and temporal beings possibly have cognitive access to them? Most telling for our purposes, where in these *abstracta* is normativity to be found?²³

Suppose that Hitler correctly believes that there exists platonically the true proposition that "it is wrong to kill an innocent person (except in certain extraordinary

²¹After the discussion of a Kantian approach, it might seem appropriate to turn next to utilitarianism. I do not do so because, to my knowledge, the theory itself does not address the normative question of why any given individual should adhere to the principle of utility. Thus, in terms of the question at hand, utilitarianism must be parasitic on more fundamental metaethical claims. Some utilitarians with whom I am acquainted seem to see the principle of utility as a non-natural, necessary truth that is intuitively recognized by reason. If so, then it is one of those Platonic *abstracta* under discussion in this section.

²²I am thinking here of an analysis of moral truth which might parallel Jerrold Katz's view of logical and mathematical truth in *Realistic Rationalism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

²³A standard criticism leveled against G. E. Moore's claim that goodness and badness are simply immediately recognizable, non-natural properties is that on this view, though one might "see" goodness and badness, one has no reason to promote the former and eschew the latter. (See Thomas L. Carson, *Value and the Good Life* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2000), pp. 189–90.

circumstances)” and that this further entails the true proposition that “it is wrong to order the Final Solution.” He may even grant that many people seem to feel powerfully motivated to live by the standards of this Platonic world. But neither of these facts is related to his desires in such a way as to provide any reason at all to conform to the moral claim. Grounding morality in non-natural moral properties or in the World of the Forms has the advantage of making it independent of contingent human interests and behavior, but at the cost of rendering moral claims apparently unconnected to and ineffectual in the world in which we live. Again, Hitler has no irrefutable reason not to order the Final Solution.

V. DIVINE COMMAND THEORY

Many contemporary philosophers, when they hear it suggested that God has some necessary relationship to ethics, assume that the theory being advanced is Divine Command Theory: X is right because God commands it. This position is often dismissed with a rhetorical question: How can we possibly know what God wants? This practical question is not the real problem, since the believer has an answer to it. If anything, the embarrassment for believers is that they have rather too many competing answers. But if a view were to be rejected because of internecine warfare among its adherents, there would be little philosophy left. And if the criticism is that the evidence for what God wants comes from philosophically suspect sources, the believer can remind the critic that in the contemporary literature on what is right and wrong the basic unit of evidence and the court of last appeal tend to be the brute intuitions of academics. The believer can rightly hold that the evidence for God’s will supplied by his preferred mix of natural reason, holy writ, tradition, and institutional authority is at least as well-grounded as *that*. One might argue against Divine Command Theory that its ethical conclusions will have force only for believers, and so there is an impasse when it comes to settling moral problems. That is certainly true, but one can hardly fault a view because its conclusions fail to convince those who reject its premises.

Nonetheless, Divine Command Theory must be rejected for two related reasons. First, at least in its pure version such as that advanced by William of Ockham, the theory holds that what God commands depends only on God’s will and God can will literally anything logically possible.²⁴ Rape, pillage, and murder could be the right things to do if God wills it so, and He *really could*. A metaethic with this ultimate arbitrariness at its core cannot adequately ground the objective truth of our test proposition, “Hitler ought not to have ordered the Final Solution.”

Moreover, Divine Command Theory strikes at the heart of belief about the nature of God. God’s goodness is non-negotiable for the theist. Presumably the meaning

²⁴For an overview of the subject, see Janine Idziak’s introduction to *Questions on an Ethics of Divine Commands* by Andrew of Neufchateau, O.F.M. (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp.xxv–xxxii. Some contemporary philosophers of religion address the problems with Divine Command Theory. William Alston, for example, offers “Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists” and ends up with a view much closer to Aquinas’s than to Ockham’s (*Divine Nature and Human Language* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989], see especially p. 266).

we assign to our term “good” is derived from our recognition of the good occurrent in the world. On Divine Command Theory any choice logically possible could be commanded by God and hence could be the “good” choice of the “good” person. But then the term “good” ceases to have any positive content and the view that “God is good” becomes empty.

This point is damning enough in itself, but it is also directly relevant to the normative aspect of strong moral realism. The existence of God is invoked to support a theory that can guarantee that the consequences of engaging in horrendous evil are worse for the agent than the consequences of behaving well. Not only does Divine Command Theory rob “evil” and “well” of consistent objective content, but it allows that God might act in a capricious and untrustworthy way, rewarding the perpetrator of horrendous evil and punishing the one who behaves well.

Some contemporary philosophers of religion have grasped the other horn of the *Euthyphro* dilemma and assumed that God wills the right choices *because* they are right. There is an objective moral order existing independently of God that He recognizes and enforces.²⁵ Thus God plays the combined roles (with maximal efficiency) of the ethicist and the policeman. For our present metaethical purposes of providing morality with an objective and normative ground, this view of the relationship of God to value might be barely sufficient, but since it entails at least some of the difficulties mentioned in connection with the hypothesis of platonic *abstracta* and presupposes a seriously inadequate analysis of the nature of God, I prefer to make the case for God and moral realism based on the classical theist approach promoted by Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas.²⁶

VI. CLASSICAL THEISM

According to the classical theism of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, God exists necessarily and as perfectly as possible. He is everything that it is better to be *simpliciter* (powerful, personal, rational, and so on), without any limitation at all.²⁷ He exists absolutely *a se*, so He does not instantiate properties that are “there” independently of Him. He does not *have* properties at all but rather just *is* the perfections that we ascribe to Him. All these perfections, though distinct from the perspective of human understanding, are in God identical with His existence and with one another.²⁸ Thus God is not just good, He is goodness *per se*; the absolute source and standard of all good. What it means for a creature to be good is for it to

²⁵See for example, Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, revised edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 210.

²⁶I explain the inadequacies in the chapter on goodness in my *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 126–27.

²⁷Many contemporary philosophers of religion are puzzled by this conception of God. I have found the work of Fr. W. Norris Clarke very helpful in coming to an appreciation of Aquinas’s concept of being. See *Explorations in Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1994), esp. chap. 3, “Action as the Self-Revelation of Being: A Central Theme in the Thought of St. Thomas.”

²⁸I have tried to defend this very difficult view in “The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity,” *Religious Studies* 32 (1996) 165–86, reprinted in *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), pp. 29–60.

reflect the nature of God. The moral order is a guide for rational agents to be more like God, which means perfecting one's nature. Another name for the goal of ethical activity is "happiness."

This traditional God is providential. He is the person who made everything. He values everything and wants what is best for it. To this divine attitude the tradition gives the technical term "love." Humans are especially valuable because we are "made in God's image." As rational agents we are far more like God than are the cosmic dust, the fungus, and the aardvark—all good things, just not *as* good. God wants us to do what is right because that is how we become as much like Him as is possible for a rational, corporeal creature.

This tradition has it that human existence is a two-tiered affair. We exist temporarily as natural animals on planet Earth and have a good commensurate to this present life by actualizing our natures as human animals. This is an appropriate goal, but only an interim one. Our ultimate goal consists in eternal happiness in a state of being more closely and consciously in the presence of God. God, of course, does not become *more* ubiquitous, but we become able to apprehend His presence to the fullest extent possible for us. The beatific vision exceeds the bounds of present human imagination, so suffice it to say that whatever situation you envision as the happiest and most satisfying, the after life is far better than that and does not end. The point of our existence here and now is to start becoming the sort of people who can turn to God and enjoy Him. Apparently the best way, perhaps the only way, to accomplish this is for the rational creature to have a say in what he will become—hence, free will and moral choice.²⁹

It is this conception of God and His relationship to human beings that provides an adequate ground for strong moral realism by offering a combination of absolute objectivity and irrefusable normativity that other theories fail to provide. As with Plato's World of the Forms, God's existence and hence His nature are necessary, so there is no contingency about the ultimate standard for value and hence for moral truth. But the deep schizophrenia of a non-theist universe containing non-natural *abstracta* is entirely avoided. The objective source of value is intimately related to the rest of the universe in that God is the *person* who keeps everything in being from moment to moment by the power of His thought, motivated by love. So, the solution to the question about normativity is clear. In God's universe being good means achieving ultimate and everlasting happiness.

Why should Hitler not order the Final Solution? Because hurting and attempting to exterminate the creatures God loves and values most (though in a theist universe the latter attempt must fail) means turning against the absolute source of all value and being in the universe, with the consequence of making yourself incapable of final happiness and perhaps plunging yourself into everlasting misery.³⁰ The non-theist

²⁹Calvin and Luther, following Augustine, would disagree, but I shall assume what I take to be Anselm's position and one which is a fairly standard line among contemporary philosophers of religion.

³⁰Contemporary philosophers of religion debate the question of whether or not a good and just God could allow the everlasting suffering of His creatures, even if it was self-imposed. My argument does not require that there be a Hell, but only that the choice for terminal evil make one incapable of eternal happiness.

moral realist theories entailed that Hitler could recognize the facts as they portray them, understand all that followed from them, and still have no irrefusable reason not to order the Final Solution. All of these theories entailed that there is no irrefusable reason to reject horrendous evil.

Suppose Hitler accepts the truth of classical theism. Then he accepts that it is objectively the case that God is the standard for value. He cannot rationally propose the triumph of Aryan blood or anything else as an alternative source or ground for value. He accepts that all human beings, since we are made in the image of God, have objective value. Unlike Nagel, he cannot reasonably reject this. Could he, as with non-theistic Platonism, recognize that ordering the Final Solution is wrong and yet find therein no reason to act? The theistic system entails that turning towards God is the way to everlasting happiness, while turning away closes off that possibility.

A possible reason to turn away suggests itself if one were to judge that in a theist universe the loss of happiness is worth the price if it allows one to assert one's freedom and independence. Better, one might think, to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven. But one could express one's freedom equally by freely choosing good, and classical theism entails that one is absolutely dependent upon God for one's very existence from second to second. One cannot accept that view and rationally hope for independence. Milton's Satan is a liar, an idiot, or both. Assuming that one chooses on the basis of some kind of desire or interest, a case could be made that it would be literally psychologically impossible for someone who *fully* appreciated the ultimate consequences of terminal evil to choose it. In any case, it could not be judged reasonable. In a classical theist universe one does have irrefusable reason to avoid horrendous evil.

But Kantian intuitions might suggest that this position devalues morality by making virtue into mere prudence. If the reason one conforms to the moral order is fear of what one might lose, is one really *good*? And what sort of deity would set things up this way, governing through reward and punishment? I have long been suspicious of Kant's claim that in order to be virtuous one must be too fine to be moved by the hope of Heaven or even natural love of one's fellows. It seems both prideful and disconnected from human reality. But allow it for the sake of argument; the good will is the one that does not act on the basis of desire related to one's own well-being and the well-being of those for whom one has a natural love. Allow that the Kantian, who finds his reasons and subsequent motivations only in his interest in doing his duty, is the epitome of the virtuous human being, while the person who is good out of hope of Heaven is barely a moral creature at all. Although I think that this is false, nothing in my argument conflicts with it. My argument is just that, if we live in a theist universe, so long as one is human and hence has some interest (broadly construed) in one's well-being (broadly construed) one has an irrefusable reason to attempt to stay in God's good graces and hence avoid horrendous evil. This, by itself, does not conflict with the view that it is morally superior to act from non-self-interested reasons and motives.

VII. GOD'S ROLE

By introducing God we can secure the sort of ultimate objectivity and powerful normativity required for strong moral realism. But having once invoked God at this initial stage, can we discuss further issues in metaethics and ethics as if He were not there? If so, then my argument may be open to the charge that, beyond this most abstract level, belief in God does not make any real difference to how we develop our ethical and metaethical theories. In response, let me sketch very briefly how belief in God can play a substantive and systematic role in ethical philosophy.

The first thing to note is that, while including God in one's metaethical theory changes things radically in one way, by removing any hint of subjectivity and the option of a rational amorality, it need not entail a wholesale rejection of the methods and conclusions that have seemed reasonable to non-theist philosophers. The tools of the trade can still be experience and reason. The believer, however, will incorporate some beliefs entailed by theism which will have an impact on ethical thinking at various levels. A workable theist metaethics could combine elements of the non-theist realisms discussed above. Our primary goal, as Aristotle noted, can be to fulfill our natures, that is, achieve happiness, because God wants what is best for us: that we should flourish in imitation of Him. Shall we then be egoists? Certainly not. All the various arguments for being concerned for others are still in place, only more so. In our own interests and as naturally social animals we care about our family, friends, neighbors, society, and laws. But we are *everlasting* social animals which means that the good of others is of even more importance for us. Moreover, the goal is to become a more adequate reflection of God, and one does that by bringing one's own attitudes into line with God's. God loves all those others and wants the best for them. On this analysis the choice between altruism and egoism is a false dichotomy. *Pace* Kant, it is surely not egoism to promote the satisfaction of our own desires, when what we desire is the good of others because we love them.

With the introduction of God, the Scriptural/Kantian dictum that you ought to do unto others as you would have them do unto you can be advanced without the difficulties attaching to Nagel's version. Nagel attempted to ground the rejection of egoism in extending to others our estimate of our own value. The trouble was that, in an atheist universe, we might rationally judge that we really do not have any objective value at all, or we might subjectively choose to assign ourselves value on the basis of properties which we judge to be unique or almost unique to ourselves. On the theist view it is not *our* estimate of our value that counts, it is God's. The classical theist position is that there is a fundamental equality among all human beings since we are each an *imago dei*.³¹ The theist metaethicist can embrace some balance of the standard ethical values of individual flourishing, maximizing happiness, and treating people as equals and as ends in themselves. But he will see these values as rooted in the necessary nature of God and judge failure to adhere to them to be the formula for personal disaster.

³¹See for example Augustine's response to those who argued that women were metaphysically inferior to men. *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* (Book III, 22,34).

So, belief in God need not change the landscape of ethical debate entirely, and yet it can make a difference to how one decides moral problems. For example, the parties concerned in some moral transaction will include not only oneself and other creatures but also God. Take the issue of suicide. From an atheist perspective, it is hard to see why suicide might not be a good choice for you if you are tired of life and your friends and family do not mind much. From a theistic perspective, Plato's argument that God has placed you here like a soldier at your post and that it is not up to you to decide when to leave has some force. Obviously there is room for discussion with regard to how you might judge what would constitute God's relieving you of your duty. The point is, you have to take it into consideration.

And how one satisfies ethical values may look different to a theist than to an atheist. Should we, for example, interfere with the would-be suicide who will not be missed and who is likely to be more unhappy than happy for the rest of his natural life? In the interests of autonomy and beneficence the atheist may reasonably judge that there is no reason to try to stop the suicide. The theist, though, may believe that suicide is terribly wrong because in attempting to destroy oneself one effects a turning away from God that can have dire and everlasting consequences. The theist grants that in the interests of autonomy she should stand back, but the suicide would inflict such great harm upon himself that the theist may reasonably judge that beneficence demands that she step in and try to stop him. (I take it that the agnostic, and perhaps the law, should engage in some Pascalian wagering. The costs of *not* stepping in if there is a God far outweigh those of stepping in if there is not, so it is legitimate to interfere if you are not sure that there is no God.) So, belief in God does make a real difference to the course of moral debate.

VIII. POSTSCRIPT: AN ARGUMENT FOR GOD FROM EVIL

The above argument entails the corollary that while the existence of human wickedness, which I shall call "moral evil," is certainly a problem for the theist, it is also a problem, though of a very different sort, for the atheist. (The related problem of suffering lies outside the scope of the present discussion.) Suppose one agrees that horrendous evil exists, it is objectively terribly wrong, and this entails that there must be some reason not to do it that cannot rationally be rejected or ignored. The atheist world view will not allow a metaethics that can support that judgment. One might just insist on the judgment and on atheism and conclude that the universe is opaque to reason and that there is no hope of making sense of things. But *ceteris paribus* a systematic world view is preferable to one with disparate, totally unrelated elements.

Were there a very good argument against the existence of God, it might be reasonable to opt for the incoherent picture of the universe, but there is not. Traditionally the argument from evil, including the evil of human wickedness, has been seen as a (perhaps the most) powerful argument against God. And certainly evil in a God-made world does demand some sort of explanation, which theists have worked long and hard to supply. But the evidence of evil cuts both ways. The more the non-theist insists upon the depth and reality of moral evil, the less plausible the non-theist

universe becomes. From the non-theist's perspective all the commotion of human history is, objectively and in the final analysis, the orderly but chance rearrangements of particles that, even if you add them all together, amount to next to nothing in the pointless vastness of space and time. If for a moment some particles should fall together as they did at Auschwitz, where is the ultimate horror? But if in some ultimate and objective way Auschwitz really ought not to have been, then we must have the sort of value and our lives must have the sort of meaning that could only be bestowed upon us by God.³²

³²I would like to thank Kai Draper and Aron Vadakin for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.